

<https://helda.helsinki.fi>

Commentary on Robin Wooffitt's Paper 'Poetic and Sociological Analysis of an Enigmatic Moment'

Peräkylä, Anssi

2019-05-04

Peräkylä, A. 2019, 'Commentary on Robin Wooffitt's Paper 'Poetic and Sociological Analysis of an Enigmatic Moment'', *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, pp. 355-360. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10481885.2019.1614833>

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/317498>

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10481885.2019.1614833>

unspecified

acceptedVersion

Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.

This is an electronic reprint of the original article.

This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

Please cite the original version.

Anssi Peräkylä

COMMENTARY ON ROBIN WOOFFITT'S PAPER "POETIC CONFLUENCE: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF AN ENIGMATIC MOMENT".

To cite this article: Anssi Peräkylä (2019) Commentary on Robin Wooffitt's Paper "Poetic Confluence: A Sociological Analysis of an Enigmatic Moment", *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 29:3, 355-360, DOI: 10.1080/10481885.2019.1614833

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10481885.2019.1614833>

By examining moments of telepathic communication, Robin Wooffitt makes a convincing case that rapprochement of sociology and psychoanalysis could be beneficial for both. I fully share his conviction about this. In my commentary, I will start from the empirical phenomenon that Wooffitt quite aptly calls poetic confluence, and thereafter, I will discuss the more broad programme regarding psychoanalysis and sociology.

Poetic confluence: description or explanation

Wooffitt discusses moments in social interaction where one interlocutor says something that bears a strong resemblance to what has just been in the mind of the other interlocutor. He first takes up psychoanalytic papers – a recent one by de Peyer (2016), and an almost forgotten paper by Hollós (1933) – which report occurrences of this in psychoanalytic settings. However, the main message of Wooffitt is elsewhere: he shows that the same thing happens in everyday social interactions. In elaborating on this, Wooffitt draws upon Schegloff's (2003) paper on the same phenomenon and shows some instances of it from his own collection.

Here is the first important contribution of Wooffitt's paper: showing that what happens in the psychoanalytic consultation room is anchored in generic communication practices that are there also outside this room. Even the most extraordinary psychoanalytic event, such as telepathic communication between the analyst and the patient, is not an exception. An implication for research is obvious: if we want to fully understand psychoanalytic process, we benefit a lot from the understanding of conversation and communicative practices in general.

It was pointed out already in Schegloff's (2003) paper that when one interlocutor uses a word that bears resemblance to the unstated thoughts of the other, the words that are uttered are not in one-to-one relation to the unstated thoughts. In Wooffitt's terms, the resemblance between the unstated thoughts and the words uttered by the co-participant is more like poetic (yet recognizable), and the words, as they occur in the context of the other interlocutors utterance, are "clumsily formulated, or contain a speech error, or ill fitted to the context" (Wooffitt in this issue, p. XX). Up to this point, Wooffitt basically follows Schegloff's train of thought. Yet, he also goes beyond it, and suggests something that neither Peyer (2016) and Hollós (1933) nor Schegloff (2003) have attended to.

One fresh contribution by Wooffitt has to do with the affective function of poetic confluence.

In poetic confluence, one interlocutor's turn reflects upon the mental imagery of the other. Wooffitt (p. XX in this issue) states that "[t]he subsequent poetic turn seems to offer a formulation or version of that imagery that, in various ways, *modulates, neutralises or detoxifies* those personal relevancies, or the extreme or evocative manner in which they are realised in thought or imagery" (my italics). This modulation strengthens the affiliation between the interlocutors. Here, Wooffitt seems to argue, lies the therapeutic potential of the poetic confluence: matters that are in variable ways painful, traumatic, or sensitive – unstated, but still in the interlocutor's mind – can be reflected upon through poetic confluence in less charged forms. Wooffitt does not refer to Bion here, yet there is a potential connection: the poetic confluence can involve Bionian 'metabolization' and 'containment' of painful mental contents.

While I like this exploration of the interaction function of poetic confluence, I find it fitting only to a part of the data that is available. While the examples shown by Wooffitt involve affectively charged mental imagery, some of the examples that Schegloff (2003) gives about poetic confluence do not seem to have such neutralising or detoxifying function. The thoughts that prompt other interlocutor's misplaced words seem often to be reveries or associations without much overt affective investment, for example noticings of two persons wearing similar earrings, or reflections about somebody's breakfast. This suggests that poetic confluence – as indeed most interactional practices – may serve many socio-relational functions; neutralisation may be just one of them. It is also important to note that in poetic confluence, the neutralising processes, if they are there, take place differently than in the interactional settings that we know about: what is being neutralized has not become intersubjectively expressed before the neutralisation. Unlike in psychotherapy or child-caregiver interaction, the neutralising (or containment) takes place 'behind the backs' of the participants.

Another interactional function of poetic confluence, suggested by Wooffitt, is the management of attention: "to re-engage a co-participant's attention to the ongoing interaction at a point where their mind has wandered" (Wooffitt in this issue, p. XX). The management of attention indeed is an ever-present issue in social interaction. In a paper published long time ago, Goffman (1957) built a picture of everyday interaction where mutual attention is felt as a norm but is still always at risk, due to competing engagements, self-awareness and other forms of inattention. Wooffitt nicely adds on this discussion on the organisation of attention in conversation.

Description and explanation

The papers by Wooffitt (in this issue), de Peyer (2016) and Schegloff (2003) converge in a description of the phenomenon of poetic confluence: one participant producing "a spoken turn that exhibits a poetic relationship to a co-participant's *unspoken* thoughts or *unarticulated* mental imagery" (Wooffitt in this issue, p. XX). Their ways part, however, in the *explanation* of the phenomenon, i.e., in their ways of suggesting what might cause or make possible this seemingly telepathic communication. De Peyer suggests an explanation by way of analogy of quantum physics (the communication between minds is here like the communication between particles in the quantum world); this analogue-based explanation is emphatically rejected by Wooffitt. I very much agree with the latter here: processes of human communication and interaction need to be explained by phenomena that can be shown to be relevant to social or psychological processes,

and analogies from a completely different level of organisation do not have any explanatory power here.

Wooffitt's looks for an explanatory answer from a different direction: he suggests that *sociological studies of everyday verbal communication* can provide the answers. Such studies aim at explicating the ways in which "social action is conducted at a tacit or implicit level", and Wooffitt seems to suggest that poetic confluence indeed involves such tacit or implicit processes. While I very much agree with Wooffitt about the direction from which the answer should be sought, I am still left with some puzzlement. It seems to me that Wooffitt's analysis does explicate the *process* of poetic confluence (i.e. sequences in which it takes place) and it suggests some of its *interactional functions* (what relational consequences these moments may have). Yet, he does not answer the underlying question *what makes this form of communication possible*.

Here, in my opinion, Schegloff's (2003) text is helpful: he has not an answer, but he specifies a bit the direction of where it can be sought. He suggests that poetic confluence has to do with the domain of conversational organisation called *word selection*. Word selection involves practices through which the prior talk informs the selection of words in any current utterance. On a more general level (referring not only to talk but also to embodied action), Goodwin (2013) points out the the same processes: any action is built "by reusing, with transformation, public resources that can be found in the environment" (Goodwin 2013:9).

As Schegloff (2003) points out, we still know quite a little about the processes of how word selection actually happens. Schegloff and Goodwin tell us that the selection of words in any current turns in many ways echoes, makes use and transforms what has been happening just before, but the specific mechanics of this are not known. Poetic confluence appears to be part of such yet rather unknown mechanics. So, the description of the process and functions of poetic confluence is not yet an explanation, and we may indeed acknowledge the current lack of explanation and hope for one to be found in the future.

Between sociology and psychoanalysis

With reference to Stolorow (1991), Wooffitt ends his paper with a plea for "a joint psychanalytic project" that could embrace the psychic phenomena as properties of intersubjective system. Again, I could not agree more. The sociology-psychoanalysis rapprochement has a long and partially troubled history, but it is possible that what Wooffitt is suggesting indeed points to some fresh possibilities in this.

A few years ago, Chancer and Andrews (2014) published a collection on papers on the relation between sociology and psychoanalysis, as seen from the perspective of sociology. The title – *The unhappy divorce of sociology and psychoanalysis* – tells a lot. There have been moments when psychoanalytic ideas have penetrated sociological theories. These include the heyday of Talcott Parsons' social systems theory, the Freudo-Marxian studies by Fromm, Adorno and Marcuse, Smelser's conceptualisation of ambivalence, and Chodorow's studies on developmental basis of gender identities. In recounting these inspiring encounters between the two disciplines, Chancer and Andrews' book still leaves the reader sad: on the level of conceptual work, the rapprochements of psychoanalysis and sociology have been rather short lived and they have not resulted in enduring traditions.

In this context, what Wooffitt is suggesting is something new. He is not, in the first place, pleading for a merger between sociological theory and Freudian concepts such as drive or oedipus complex. Rather, he is suggesting that the empirical work that is being done in a particular area of sociology – in conversation analysis (e.g. Sidnell & Stivers 2012), or more broadly, in interactional sociology (Dennis, Philburn & Smith 2013) can inform the particular concerns of the intersubjective school of psychoanalysis. This rapprochement can take place in two areas. One area of rapprochement is the understanding of the psychotherapeutic / psychoanalytic practice. As Wooffitt points out, there is an emerging tradition of conversation analytical studies of psychotherapy (see e.g. Peräkylä et al. 2008; Madill 2015), covering such practices as delivery and reception of reformulations of the patient's talk (Antaki 2008), interpretations (Bercelli et al 2008; Peräkylä 2010 and 2011), mirroring of voice between the therapist and the patient (Weiste & Peräkylä 2014), affiliation ruptures (Muntigl et al. 2013; Muntigl & Horvath 2014) and even dream interpretation (Peräkylä & Bergmann in review). Quite recently, the conversation analytical account of psychotherapy has been linked to the measurement of the physiological responses in the participants of therapeutic sessions (Voutilainen et al. 2018). I fully agree with Wooffitt that this line of study could be very informative for the intersubjective psychoanalysis.

However, there contribution of conversation analysis is not limited to the study of psychotherapeutic sessions. Wooffitt's paper clearly shows that the study of *generic communicative practices* can be most informative to the understanding of ways in which mental phenomena are part of the intersubjective field. What are these practices, apart from poetic confluence? Thinking about the current foci of conversation analytical studies, the most directly relevant ones could have to do with the organisation of emotional expression and regulation in interaction (e.g. Peräkylä & Sorjonen 2012), with the organisation of cognition and epistemic rights (e.g. Heritage 2012) as well as studies having to do with the intersection of cognition and embodied action (e.g. Goodwin 2013). Yet any studies on the verbal and non-verbal aspects of interaction are relevant. They can show, basically, how what we experience as mind emerges from collaborative social action.

What would be the pay-off of sociology-psychoanalysis rapprochement, for interactional sociology? For a long time, conversation analysts have been maintaining a strict boundary between their concerns and psychology (see e.g. Schegloff 1988). Basically, what the subjective experience of the interactants has been treated as inaccessible for the method. The boundary has been beneficial as it has helped to delienate interactive practices as a distinct area of study. Yet the exclusion of psychological phenomena can also seriously impoverish the sociological world view – as Wooffitt also points out. Therefore, conversation analysis is in the process of opening itself towards psychological and subjective phenomena (see e.g. Heritage 2011). The dialogue with intersubjective psychoanalysis, promoted by Wooffitt, can be an important part of that.

References

Antaki, C. (2008). Formulations in psychotherapy. In A. Peräkylä, C. Antaki, S. Vehviläinen & I. Leudar (eds.), *Conversation analysis and psychotherapy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 26–42.

- Bercelli, F., Rossano, F., & Viaro, M. (2008). Clients' responses to therapists' reinterpretations. In *Conversation analysis and psychotherapy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 43-61.
- Chancer, L., & Andrews, J. (2014). *The unhappy divorce of sociology and psychoanalysis: Diverse perspectives on the psychosocial*. London: Palgrave-Macmillan.
- Dennis, A., Philburn, R., & Smith, G. (2013). *Sociologies of interaction*. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons.
- de Peyer, J. (2016). Uncanny communication and the porous mind. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 26(2), 156-174.
- Goffman, E. (1957). Alienation from interaction. *Human relations*, 10(1), 47-60.
- Goodwin, C. (2013) The co-operative, transformative organization of human action and knowledge. *Journal of Pragmatics* 46:8-23.
- Heritage, J. (2011). Territories of knowledge, territories of experience: Empathic moments in interaction. In T.Stivers, L.Mondada & J.Steensig (Eds.) *The morality of knowledge in conversation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 159-183.
- Heritage, J. (2012). Epistemics in action: Action formation and territories of knowledge. *Research on Language & Social Interaction*, 45(1), 1-29.
- Hollós, I. (1933). Psychopathologie alltäglicher telepathischer Erscheinungen. *Imago*, 19(4), 529-546.
- Madill, A. (2015). Conversation analysis and psychotherapy process research. In Gelo O., Pritz A., Rieken B. (eds.) *Psychotherapy research*, Vienna: Springer, 501-515.
- Muntigl, P., Knight, N., Watkins, A., Horvath, A. O., & Angus, L. (2013). Active retreating: Person-centered practices to repair disaffiliation in therapy. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 53, 1-20.
- Muntigl, P., & Horvath, A. O. (2014). The therapeutic relationship in action: How therapists and clients co-manage relational disaffiliation. *Psychotherapy Research*, 24(3), 327-345.
- Peräkylä, A. (2010). Shifting the perspective after patient's response to an interpretation: conversation analysis of "listening to listening." *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 91, 1363–1384.
doi:10.1111/j.1745-8315.2010.00323.x
- Peräkylä, A. (2011). After interpretation: third-position utterances in psychoanalysis. *Research on Language & Social Interaction*, 44(3), 288-316.
- Peräkylä, A., Antaki, C., Vehviläinen, S., & Leudar, I. (Eds.). (2008). *Conversation analysis and psychotherapy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Peräkylä & Bergmann (in editorial review). Practices of joint meaning creation. Dreams in psychoanalytic discussion.
- Peräkylä, A., & Sorjonen, M. L. (Eds.) (2012). *Emotion in interaction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schegloff, E. A. (1988). Goffman and the analysis of conversation. In P. Drew & A. Wootton (Eds.) *Erving Goffman: Exploring the interaction order*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 89-135.
- Schegloff, E. A. (2003). On ESP puns. In Glenn, P., LeBaron, C. D., and Mandelbaum, J. (Eds.) *Studies in Language and Social Interaction: In Honour of Robert Hopper*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 452-460.
- Sidnell, J., & Stivers, T. (Eds.). (2012). *The handbook of conversation analysis* (Vol. 121). Chichester: Blackwell.

Stolorow, R. D. (1991). The intersubjective context of intrapsychic experience: A decade of psychoanalytic inquiry. *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, 11(1-2), 171-184.

Voutilainen, L., Henttonen, P., Kahri, M., Ravaja, N., Sams, M., & Peräkylä, A. (2018). Empathy, Challenge, and Psychophysiological Activation in Therapist–Client Interaction. *Frontiers in psychology*, 9, article 530. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00530

Weiste, E., & Peräkylä, A. (2014). Prosody and empathic communication in psychotherapy interaction. *Psychotherapy Research*, 24(6), 687-701.

Wooffitt, R. (2019). Poetic confluence: A sociological analysis of an enigmatic moment. In this issue.